

Idols of Security

Exodus 32:1-14

It's been hard to fully grasp the utter destruction which has occurred over the past week in northern California wine country—devastation that comes in the wake of what we have previously witnessed in the Caribbean, particularly Puerto Rico. Everything in their respective worlds has changed. Nearly all their material possessions have vanished—the very evidence of their life's existence—unrecoverable from maelstroms of hurricane or fire.

In communities like Santa Rosa, residents return home to nothing but char and ash. In an instant everything went up in flames—their homes, their neighborhoods—in some tragic cases, even their neighbors. Very little is identifiable, even the landscape and yards known so well. It's like the Angel of Death swept through their town one night and claimed every semblance of life.

In the aftermath of crippling hurricanes, it is very similar, though reality may be even harsher. Most homes in Puerto Rico are still standing, but left in partial, irreparable wreckage. Windows shattered and roofs torn off, leaving the interiors of endless households exposed to the destructive force of flooding rain. The lack of power (both electrical and political) has taken its toll on the suffering population. Possessions have been ruined, if not by wind and rain, then over the course of days and weeks when mold and mildew rendered them worthless. Like with a fire, one must start over, but with a flood it seems to take much longer to realize what one has is now lost forever.

Doubtless, our hearts are with such people in crisis. We wouldn't want to go through such a nightmare. At the very least, we might count our

blessings for what we have been spared or, on some deeper level, appreciate even more how dependent we are upon what we have, what we do, and what we aspire to, and what we truly value in the normal course of life. If we faced a similar loss, what would that do to us—what would that mean? How would life change for you and me? Of all we possess, what would we fear losing most of all? What might we cling to as essential and paramount to our sense of wellbeing, above everything else? What could we not live without?

The common answer in times of crisis is obvious: the people who make up our lives (e.g., spouses, children, grandchildren, mothers, fathers, friends, and the like)—those through whom we derive much pleasure, meaning, and purpose (I might add our pets to that list as they're loved as much). To lose anyone we love would be devastating—more overwhelming to our souls than if we been slammed with a crippling disaster and are grasping at the pieces left to pick up. It would be hard to imagine how one can go on living.

However, there are other things we value in life which may not be as apparent, but have a similar role to play. It's more about the security and meaning we derive from them or believe they provide, as individuals or as a society or nation. At times they far exceed their inherent worth because, out of insecurity or spiritual restlessness, we look to them more than we should to inspire us, stabilize us, or provide a measure of assurance and meaning for our lives. More than we might realize, such things can become so central to us we cannot imagine a life apart from them, which is, then, a form of idolatry. These things, in effect, are idols of security.

The other day, a Facebook friend of mine posted a question, “What are the gods/idols of today's society?” (He must have been preaching on the

same lectionary text!). I found the responses interesting and somewhat revealing across the range of opinion. The more obvious ones were listed repeatedly: money, sports, fame, certain athletes and Hollywood celebrities, personal success, sex, food, alcohol and drugs, automobiles, technology, medicine, and the like. I suppose that's to be expected; it's not hard to grasp how idolatrous these things can be once we start to believe we can't live without them. Others, however, were less cliché, but strikingly provocative and relevant to our times: political ideology, government, firearms, gun control, military might, heroes, first responders, the American flag, the Confederate flag, white supremacy, patriotism, nationalism. Still others were prophetically astute: popular religion, successful churches, our own contrived images of God, ourselves. The list was long, but not exhaustive by any means; the point was clear: people value or depend upon certain things to help them manage their lives—to stabilize, inspire, protect, or provide standing in society or give them something to revere or believe in as a theme central to their lives.

Why idols have such power over us will vary, but when enough people trust, affirm, and depend on them, then they rise to a level that can be counterproductive and even threaten the welfare of an entire society or nation. Idols function like ancient deities: they have power and meaning because we ascribe that to them; we look to them to bring good fortune our way, or to protect our interests, or to provide inspiration, identity, or whatever we lack from any other source. But then they attain a spiritual power to control and enslave people—mentally, emotionally, spiritually—commanding loyalty and uniform agreement that ultimately is coercive and destructive.

Several examples mentioned on that Facebook list are idols of security across our entire society demanding reverence and authority beyond their inherent worth. An obvious one is ideology. Entire segments of our society allow the power of ideology to control their lives, especially on the political right and left. That's why we're so divided—our partisan ideological loyalties prevent us from grasping, even engaging, someone or some idea from the other side.

Another easy one is money. It's a common complaint about how much this controls the world, if not our personal lives. This is such a longstanding idol of human civilization that even Jesus remarked how much life comes down to a choice between God or Mammon. Many can imagine life without God before they can one without Mammon!

However, one that could surprise us relates to the military—surprising insofar as most people view it as a given and can't imagine the world any differently. What would our nation be if we didn't idolize the notion of military might—a classic idol of human security? I don't believe the idolatry is derived as much from the military itself (though sometimes it is), but more from what our society and politicians expect the military to do and provide for us. I say this while acknowledging the conventional wisdom to maintain a military for a variety of reasons, e.g., defending borders and upholding social order, as well as aiding in relief work, as we've seen most recently in the aftermath of the hurricanes.

But consider for a moment where idolatry takes over, i.e., how important military superiority has become over the past century for our national pride and identity, our sense of patriotism, not to mention our financial investment and economy, all under the umbrella of security. Could we imagine the United States in the international community

without being the dominant, superior force? What would our role be and how would we act as a nation without it? Our dependency is so great that political leaders routinely view military might as their main source of global influence, even at times against the counsel of top Generals, to the point where we are deluding ourselves that we don't need good relations with the U.N. or allies, or to maintain treaties, or be cooperative in international relations, because we're strong enough to stand on our own.

Our over-reaching reliance and reverence for military might, though, could be our nation's Achilles Heel. Why? because it's a dangerous use of power based in hubris or arrogance. It suppresses alternative options or gets us into deadly standoffs, as we currently see with Afghanistan and North Korea. For all our dependence on maintaining a superior deterrent, right now virtually every American (not to say the rest of the world) fears what will happen if our nuclear arsenal is deployed. No one knows what to do. On so many levels, we have become muscle-bound by our own military strength and political hubris. It's even our military leaders telling us this, much like President Eisenhower did 60 years ago.

Our reliance on weapons of mass destruction itself is self-defeating and idolatrous—we've made them to be humanly-conceived "gods" that command our allegiance under the delusion of security. As a result, military might and our reliance upon it has become to us like a "golden calf," before which we reverently bow. In my view, we're selling our souls to an idol of security.

The powerful allure of the "golden calf," of course, lies at the heart of this morning's story from Exodus, where this object created out of all the gold the Israelites brought with them represents the various sources of security they clung to while wandering in the wilderness of Sinai. The story

itself is paradigmatic, meaning it delivers a message on many different levels. Most scholars view it as representative of the historic struggle between Israel's professed belief in YHWH and the gods of the surrounding cultures, which integrated at various times into the religious worship of Israel, most of whom were referred to as "Ba-al." The word "Ba-al" was a Semitic word for "lord" and "master," hence various gods would possess this name pertaining to that over which they ruled. The most notable in the biblical record was the Canaanite god of fertility, Ba-al, a lord of life represented in the form of a fatted calf or bull. So, frequently, Israelites had to choose: do we entrust our lives to Ba-al or to YHWH, as both were revered as "Lord." It illustrates how often religious beliefs, tribal identity, and ideology become interwoven and idolatrous when commanding utmost loyalty and obedience.

Others take a different slant, interpreting the story in relation to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, where the golden calf symbolized Pharaoh's cult, and the people's nostalgic yearning to return to Egypt and the past—a more familiar setting, but one from which they had been delivered. For Israel, as much as they feared captivity and exile and a loss of land, there was a sense of normalcy they clung to even in an environment they despised. That happens when people feel vulnerable; they will return even to those who oppress them, or to a time that is lost forever. A familiar comfort zone can be a powerful allure—an idol of security—something from which it is hard to let go.

Still others view this story as representative of the rivalry between Moses and Aaron—the two leaders of Israel representing the dual roles of prophet and priest, with the storyteller's bias showing through, praising the faithfulness of Moses while condemning the idolatry of Aaron. Again, it

illustrates the way competitive politics and rival authority can produce idolatrous loyalties that captivate us and command our utmost allegiance.

In whatever way the story gets interpreted, it still speaks to us today, for it represents how a dependence on idols of security stand in the way of our trust in God and undermine the wisdom we receive from God's influencing Spirit. Sadly, Christians around this country are notorious for sacrificing the truth of Jesus' gospel for a number of idolatrous loyalties—materialism and wealth, power and fame, institutional authority, cultural dominance—idols that provide the allusion of security and goodness and value, but ultimately prove to be false gods.

When we're caught up in all these lesser things, we need someone like Moses to come down off the mountain and speak the truth to us. The golden calves of our world are ultimately lifeless; they have no spirit—no value aside from what we choose to grant them; they cannot provide life, they cannot protect life, but they will surely take it away if you surrender your soul to them for the sake of filling a void brought about by insecurity and selfishness.

The prophetic message on those tablets of stone remain true today as they did in ancient time, for individuals and for entire societies: don't steal, don't destroy relationships, don't covet what your neighbor has, don't cheat others, don't murder, don't do all the things that people end up doing whenever they pursue and value the lesser gods of security and meaning—the things that ultimately don't matter—that don't matter at all.

But if we trust in the Spirit of life itself—the divine creative force that moves and breathes and exists within and among us all—the moral voice that guides our consciences to value all others around us—that raises us up to the higher, more noble, altruistic ideals of life, instead of being brought

down to the baser, cruder, brutish instincts of humanity at its worst—then we will find the vision, purpose, comfort, meaning, stability, and vitality that we yearn for.

For it is the God of all life and people, known and unknown, even at times beyond our human imagination who knows no bounds, whom we glimpse through simple acts of love we experience in life. That is where peace, security, fulfillment, and purpose are found. Such a magnificent spiritual Presence can never be reduced to the material objects to which we devote so much of our lives.

I reflect on this story and how so many who have suffered loss in California, in Puerto Rico, Mexico—so many places—may be in a better position to understand what really matters and counts in life. All too many in the aftermath of trauma and disaster have been dispossessed and emptied of much of what they owned and, perhaps in some ways, what owned them. They are now forced to reckon with what they can live without.

However, I wonder if there are those who will embrace their loss as a unexpected form of divine deliverance and freedom. Through this time of suffering, they may see once again what's truly essential to life and what has true value in this world: people expressing and experiencing love, one to another—the helping and generous lives of those who embrace them in their tears and hold them in this time of need mercifully and securely. Maybe they are experiencing a fullness of the spirit of life and love which will sustain them as they move forward. Could this not be a blessing—a divine blessing—that brings family, friends, strangers, and perhaps even enemies together to take care of each other and to truly value each other's presence on earth through these difficult days?

If so, then maybe those who are still chasing after idols of their own making, who miss out on such spiritual wisdom and loving security, are the ones whom we should pray for most of all.

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